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FOREIGN POLICY

WHERE CONSENSUS ENDS

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FOR PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN, THE UNITED States-Soviet relationship is a constant preoccupation — the touchstone by which all other issues are judged. Even at the height of the Beirut hostage crisis last summer, the Russians were never far from his thoughts. Anxious to avoid comparisons with President Carter's self-imposed isolation during the Iran hostage crisis, Mr. Reagan went to a Lions Club convention in Dallas to sell his tax-reform plan. Characteristically, he departed from his prepared text to tell one of his favorite anti-Soviet stories.

"A commissar," he said, "visited a collective farm, grabbed the first fellow that was walking by and said, 'How are things going? Are there any complaints?' And the farmer . . . says, 'Oh, comrade commissar, I've never heard anyone complain.' And the commissar said, 'Well, how are the crops?' 'Oh, sir, they've never been better.' 'How about potatoes?' He said, 'Comrade commissar, if the potatoes were put in one pile, they would reach the foot of God.' And the commissar said, 'Just a minute. This is the Soviet Union — there is no God.' And the worker said, 'That's all right. There are no potatoes.' "

It was vintage Reagan, and the Lions loved it. Later in the speech he took the same sort of uncompromising line toward terrorists that he had taken toward the Soviet Union for most of his Presidency, denouncing them as "uncivilized barbarians," and he cited Theodore Roosevelt's warning: "The American people are slow to wrath, but once their wrath is kindled, it burns like a consuming fire."

Reagan's remarks reflected the distinctive flavor of his foreign policy: the evocation of America's heroic past, the stern warning to any who would threaten America's well-being, and the off-the-cuff gibe at the inefficiency of Communist economies. On Oct. 10, after years of frustrating inaction in the face of terrorist attacks against American citizens, the President was able for the first time to make good on his warning to terrorists by ordering the interception of four Palestinian hijackers aboard an airliner over the Mediterranean. Now, as the White House prepares for next month's summit meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev, United States-Soviet relations are once again at the top of the agenda. At stake, as Mr. Reagan sees it, is not just a competition between two superpowers but rather a moral struggle between good and evil, between political freedom and economic opportunity on the one side, and dictatorship and economic failure on the other. And he displays no doubt about the outcome. "I firmly believe," he says, "the tide of history is moving away from Communism and into the warm sunlight of human freedom."

This reassuring message is reminiscent of a simpler time — the halcyon years after World War II before Vietnam shattered the American foreign policy consensus, raising questions about the effectiveness of the nation's military strength and the moral righteousness of its policy. With his unfailing optimism, President Reagan is determined to restore that consensus as he restores America's self-confidence and its position in the world.

But while his general approach seems to appeal to a majority of Americans, many knowledgeable people in both parties are shaking their heads over what they describe as the President's tendency to oversimplify complex situations and to rely on nostalgia and rhetoric in the face of unpleasant realities. In the view of these critics — past and present Administration officials, members of Congress, diplomats and scholars — the President has failed to translate his broad themes into a credible, consistent foreign policy. It is for this reason, they argue, that his resounding re-election victory has not produced a strong popular and Congressional consensus behind the Administration's specific foreign policy decisions.

THE DOMINANT theme of Reagan's foreign policy is toughness: America will defend its interests through military strength; it will not hesitate to use force when necessary. This is a deliberate contrast with the policies of Reagan's

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predecessors — especially Jimmy Carter — which the President and his top advisers believe were far too conciliatory.

In the 1970's, says Secretary of State George P. Shultz, while the United States was "neglecting its defenses," the Soviet Union launched a military buildup and intervened in Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia and Afghanistan, "believing that the West was incapable of resisting." Now, he explains, "the United States is restoring its military strength and economic vigor. . . . The Soviets, in contrast, face profound structural economic difficulties and restless allies; their diplomacy and their clients are on the defensive in many parts of the world."

Since Mr. Reagan took office in 1981, almost $1.2 trillion has been earmarked for defense: for new weapons systems — the MX missile, the Stealth and B-1 bombers — and for the increased production of old ones. One Administration goal is a 600-ship Navy. In addition, the manpower crisis has been eased; higher salaries and pensions are encouraging more qualified officers and NCO's to reenlist.

Experts differ on the effectiveness of Reagan's military buildup. Says former Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr.: "I think his major contribution in the foreign policy area has been the rebuilding of America's military defenses. I think history will give him very high marks for this."

Former State Department official Helmut Sonnenfeldt believes the Administration has made its point. "If you take a Cook's tour of the world," he observes, "the places where conflict could break out, the number is much smaller than it once was. It's partly a result of Soviet policy, and partly because Reagan has created a sense of the robustness of American power."

Others argue that this immense military buildup has not bought the United States any additional security, and that it is not even relevant to many of the foreign policy problems the country will have to face in the near future.

"I think we've been lucky," says Senator Gary Hart, a Colorado Democrat. "I expect every morning to turn on the radio or open the paper and find a crisis. I fear physical harm to Duarte or Botha, Marcos overthrown, the South Korean Government out. We've delayed if not the inevitable then the possible. Military force will not solve these problems."

Some critics, pointing to America's unprecedented budget and trade deficits, argue that the Administration's massive defense outlays are a liability, enhancing American security in a narrow military sense while undermining the country's fundamental economic strength.

Other critics see danger in the gap between the Administration's tough talk and the reality of America's strategic position. They stress that no level of military expenditure can restore the kind of unchallenged superiority the United States enjoyed in the 1950's. "For two decades subsequent to World War II, the American position in the world was pre-eminent," says former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger. "In the past 20 years, as our relative power has receded, our commitments have not receded commensurately. Indeed they have grown. Thus we unavoidably live with a higher level of risk." The gap between power and commitments means a foreign policy that Schlesinger describes as "bluff backed by inadequate forces."

Not even the capture of the Achille Lauro hijackers — a flawless military exercise that boosted American morale — can obscure the fact that America's power in the 1980's is sharply limited. In these circumstances, a national consensus is more necessary than ever to make the nation's remaining power more effective.

THE ADMINISTRATION has had a mixed record in creating a Congressional consensus behind its policies. In a purely practical sense, it needs two things from Congress: money — for everything from the MX to contra aid — and approval for the use of force. Money was no problem for the first four years, as Congress, reflecting the popular perception that America's defenses needed strengthening, lined up to support the Pentagon's budget requests.

But this year, mounting deficits and widespread reports of overpayments to defense contractors created considerable resistance and bitterness. Early in the session, when Robert J. Dole, the Senate majority leader, suggested a smaller increase in defense spending than the Administration wanted, Pentagon spokesman Michael I. Burch was asked for Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger's reaction. Burch replied: "Secretary Weinberger feels that those who hope for success in bringing down the defense budget really mean success in weakening the security of the country." A few days later, an angry Senator John H. Glenn Jr. challenged Mr. Weinberger: "I do not see how you are really going to build a consensus by impugning the motives and patriotism of those who may disagree with your ideas about defense spending."

The Administration's difficulties in creating a consensus on Capitol Hill are partly a question of style. Complaints are heard — even on the Republican side of the aisle — about the Administration's failure to consult on foreign policy, its tendency to reach its own decisions and then expect Congress to support them. Says Senator William S. Cohen, a moderate Republican and member of the Armed Services Committee: "I am under no illusion that I have any access or influence with the Administration. They come to me only when they need votes." Senator Nancy L. Kassebaum, one of eight Republicans to vote against the MX, resented White House insistence that "a vote against the MX is a vote against peace." She and the other seven Senators received "Chamberlain umbrellas" from the College Republican National Committee to remind them of Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler at Munich in 1938.

After the Administration ignored widespread Congressional objections to its policy of "constructive engagement" in South Africa, Senator Dole, Senator Richard G. Lugar, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator Kassebaum, chairman of its Africa subcommittee, put their considerable weight behind a bipartisan bill containing economic sanctions against Pretoria. Only when the bill was close to passage and it was clear that both Houses would override a Presidential veto did the White House adopt limited sanctions in order to avoid a politically damaging defeat.

Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard N. Perle, who worked on Capitol Hill for many years on the staff of the late Senator Henry M. Jackson, concedes there was not enough consultation in the first couple of years of the Reagan Administration but maintains that that has changed. "There's a parallel frustration at the White House," he says. "The President is responsible for policy. He has a strategy he thinks will work. Congress won't go along. If there's a failure, the President will be held responsible. But the failure would be brought about by the unwillingness of Congress to pursue his strategy."

On a more substantive level, the difficulties in reaching a consensus reflect profound differences about the use of American power — differences between Democrats and Republicans, differences within the Administration itself.

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As difficult as it is to reach agreement on spending money for defense, it is even more difficult to agree about the spending of American lives — a question that lies at the heart of any foreign policy, but especially one that puts its primary stress on military strength rather than on conciliation. There is broad agreement among Republicans and Democrat, liberals and conservatives, that if Western Europe were attacked by the Soviet Union, the United States would honor its treaty commitments and respond. Nearly everyone reacts the same way about Japan and Korea, and about Australia and New Zealand — if they are reminded about them. Some mention Israel, although it is not a formal ally linked to the United States by a defense treaty.

Beyond these obvious cases, people say, it gets fuzzy. When it comes to ambiguous third world situations, everyone agrees that there is no agreement at all. "I think we're very confused as a nation about the use of force in foreign policy," says former Under Secretary of State Lawrence S. Eagleburger. "Grenada worked because it was done secretly, quickly, with few casualties. But the death of 200 Marines in Lebanon sent the nation into a paroxysm. It was tragic, but we lose more on the highway in a weekend. A lot of this," he adds, "is the result of Vietnam. The good, solid middle-class American doesn't think the use of force is good."

Senator Lugar ponders the same question: "We have simply eschewed the use of force altogether, as if the use of force — even in a worthy cause — is somehow intrinsically wrong."

Democratic critics, taking the Administration at its word, have precisely the opposite concern. Senator Paul S. Sarbanes says: "Force shouldn't be used as a first resort, as this Administration uses it." Former Defense Secretary Clark Clifford warns: "They always seem to be looking for a military solution rather than a diplomatic solution. It's a dangerous way to run a country."

In fact, for all the tough talk, critics on the right complain that there has been comparatively little tough action. One reason is that Mr. Weinberger, despite his vehement anti-Soviet line, is reluctant to use American troops in "gray area" conflicts unless certain conditions are met — notably, defined objectives, a clear intention of winning, and a "reasonable assurance" of popular and Congressional support.

Thus the only significant use of force has been the Grenada invasion. Hailed as the "turning of the tide" against Soviet expansionism, the invasion made a useful political point. But, in the eyes of some critics, the Administration's disproportionate pride in that accomplishment raised questions about its seriousness. Those doubts were compounded during the 1984 Olympics, when the President proclaimed America "Number One" — with its chief athletic competitors, the Soviet Union and East Germany, missing. "If only they could be persuaded to disappear altogether," joked one longtime Washington observer, "our foreign policy could be as successful as our athletes."

THE SOVIET UNION, far from disappearing, is the central focus of Reagan's foreign policy. From the start, the President pulled no verbal punches, lambasting the Soviet Union as the "evil empire." He displayed no eagerness to reach an arms-control agreement. His first major proposal on intermediate-range missiles, the "zero-option" plan, was recently described by former Secretary of State Haig as "non-negotiable . . . shortsighted if not stupid."

It was only in the fourth year of his term, as he prepared for his re-election campaign, that the President began sending more conciliatory signals to Moscow. In September 1984, he met for the first time with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko. This was not enough to satisfy his critics on the left, who were convinced that he felt no sense of urgency about controlling nuclear weapons. But it confirmed the fears of many of his staunchest supporters on the right, who noted that the Administration's actions had not always lived up to its anti-Soviet rhetoric. Secretary Shultz, they observe, never fails to point out that it was President Carter who imposed the grain embargo after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; it was President Reagan who removed it. Mr. Shultz also notes repeatedly that after the Russians shot down a Korean passenger plane in September 1983 with the loss of 259 lives, the United States protested vigorously but sent its negotiators back to the arms talks in Geneva.

As he approaches his summit meeting with Mr. Gorbachev, the President is still receiving conflicting advice from the experts in his Administration, not all of whom are reconciled to the idea of a summit. While Mr. Gorbachev bids for the peace vote in the United States and Europe, Mr. Reagan is hanging tough, yielding nothing in advance, and suggesting that the summit will succeed only if the Soviet Union makes major concessions.

REAGAN'S ANTI-Soviet stance has strained relations with the NATO allies, who generally prefer a less confrontational approach. While the Administration can point to some successes in its effort to stiffen the spine of its NATO allies — notably the promise of increased European military contributions to the alliance and the successful installation of Pershing 2 and cruise missiles in West Germany, Britain, Italy and Belgium in response to the deployment of new Soviet SS-20 missiles targeted against Western Europe — it still must face an ironic fact: Many people in Europe feel more threatened by the weapons supplied by the United States to protect them than by the adversary the weapons are designed to protect against. The feeling is so widespread that the major opposition parties in Britain and West Germany are pledged to reverse nuclear gears if elected.

This has been a frustrating problem for previous administrations, but it has been exacerbated by the Reagan record: the President's casual talk in 1981 about limited nuclear war in Europe; his failure to reach an arms-control agreement with the Soviet Union, and, most recently, his Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly known as "Star Wars." Many Europeans fear Star Wars may intensify the arms race and ultimately "decouple" the United States from any future nuclear conflict in Europe.

There is also the matter of differing political perceptions. As Sir Oliver Wright, the British Ambassador to the United States, explains, NATO has succeeded so well that to many Europeans, the Soviet Union no longer looks particularly menacing. "For Europe," he says, "détente worked well: there was peace in the most dangerous and most important part of the world." Thus, when the President repeats his litany of Soviet aggression — Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Nicaragua — as he did in his V-E Day speech in Strasbourg, France, this year, it makes little impression.

For many years, Reagan's anti-Communism applied to Peking as well as Moscow. But after he became President, he was persuaded to mute his longtime support for Taiwan and pay a visit to China because of its strategic value as a counterweight to the Soviet Union. More recently, China's move toward economic decentralization was welcomed by the Admin-

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istration as a vindication of the free-enterprise system. Said Secretary of State Shultz: "China's long march to market is a truly historic event — a great nation throwing off outmoded economic doctrines and liberating the energies of a billion talented people."

Administration officials also pride themselves on the fact that since President Reagan took office, the Soviet Union has made no new inroads in the third world. Instead, they claim, in some of the "gray areas," the situation is being reversed. "After years of guerrilla insurgencies led by Communists against pro-Western governments, we now see dramatic and heartening examples of popular insurgencies against Communist regimes," Mr. Shultz told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, referring primarily to Afghanistan, Cambodia and Nicaragua.

Afghanistan has been the least controversial of these areas in Congress, because it is a clear example of direct Soviet aggression — and there is little danger of American military involvement. There has been broad bipartisan support for the millions of dollars in covert aid that have been sent to the Afghan guerrillas through Pakistan. Though no Administration official will publicly confirm the figure, Representative Jack Kemp, a New York Republican, stated during the April Nicaragua debate that $250 million had been provided in the last year. Moreover, in July, Congress voted for the first time to provide $15 million in overt humanitarian aid.

Cambodia is a more delicate problem. The Administration had been reluctant to take the initiative, says Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, because it sensed that "the nation and Congress were not ready for a military role in Indochina." It became considerably less controversial last spring, when Representative Stephen J. Solarz, a New York Democrat who is chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, broke with other liberals and proposed that the United States provide $5 million in military aid for the two small democratic opposition groups fighting the Soviet-backed Cambodian government, which is kept in power by a large Vietnamese army.

The proposal was adopted by both House and Senate, despite vocal opposition from other liberals. Representative Michael D. Barnes, chairman of the Western Hemisphere Affairs Subcommittee and others warned of a precedent for aid to the contras in Nicaragua and expressed concern about the aid falling into the hands of the Khmer Rouge, who killed some two million Cambodians when they were in power, and who are now in a tactical alliance with the democratic groups.

Representative Solarz rejects the comparison with Nicaragua, arguing that the contras are "fighting to overthrow an indigenous government" while the Cambodians are "fighting to end the occupation of a foreign invader."

Nicaragua has been the most controversial of the three areas because of fears of American troop involvement, and doubts about the democratic credentials of the rebel groups, or "contras," fighting the Marxist Sandinista regime. In April, the President failed to persuade the House of Representatives to support a $14 million aid package for the rebel forces — primarily because many on both sides of the aisle felt the Administration was not "leveling with them." Said one State Department official: "The Administration has never fully articulated what its aims are in Nicaragua: to get rid of the Sandinistas or pressure them to agree to a reasonable solution. There's distrust on the Hill about what the Administration is doing. They haven't established their credibility, even with their own supporters." Republican Senator Cohen, who reluctantly voted for the contra aid measure adopted in the Senate, summed up the mood during the debate: "What we need is clarity. No more mirrors. No more doublespeak. No more deception."

Many of the Administration's strongest critics, such as Senator Christopher J. Dodd, a Connecticut Democrat, agree that if the Soviet Union or Cuba established a military base, or introduced sophisticated offensive weapons, in Nicaragua, "there would be a consensus to move in and remove the threat." But they argue that the United States would be in a much stronger position to do so if it had tried nonmilitary pressures first — and if it acted with the support of its allies in the region.

Administration officials, on the other hand, do not want to engage in long, drawn-out negotiations to satisfy the Latin Americans while the Sandinistas consolidate their power. They believe the Nicaraguan Government constitutes an urgent threat that must be dealt with now. As Mr. Weinberger says, "We cannot afford another Cuba in the Caribbean area."

This sort of hard-line rhetoric has led to widespread suspicion that the President, despite repeated denials, would welcome an American military solution in Nicaragua. Even if he does not *intend* to commit American troops, many of his critics believe that aid to the contras will lead inevitably to that commitment.

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Administration officials argue that, on the contrary, aid to the contras is the best hope for avoiding direct American involvement. Still, they have never ruled it out entirely. "Direct application of U.S. military force must be recognized as an eventual option, given our stakes in the region," says Mr. Shultz.

In June, less than two months after the Administration's initial defeat, the House reversed itself, bowing to Presidential and popular pressure. Instead of the original $14 million, Congress has offered the President $27 million, provided it not be distributed by the C.I.A. More important than the funds is the vote of confidence in his tough anti-Communist policy, even if he does not have an entirely free hand to carry it out.

ON JUNE 14, TWO DAYS after the contra victory in the House, Lebanese Shiite terrorists hijacked a TWA plane, plunging the Administration into a "gray area conflict" far more complex than Afghanistan or Nicaragua.

Western vulnerability to state-sponsored terrorism has been high on the Administration's agenda for some time; in fact, it is virtually the only bleak spot in Shultz's optimistic assessment of America's position in the world. Yet the Administration was clearly undecided about how to handle terrorism even before the Beirut crisis. The Secretaries of State and Defense were openly at odds over the use of marines in Lebanon between 1982 and 1984 to help prop up a Christian government and prevent Soviet-backed Syria from becoming the dominant foreign influence — a prospect Mr. Reagan described as highly damaging to American interests. Mr. Shultz was the activist; Mr. Weinberger opposed the mission. In the end, after the suicide bombing of the United States Embassy and Marine headquarters, with more than 250 Americans killed, the President sided with Defense Secretary Weinberger and pulled out the marines. There was no sign of the "swift and effective retribution" against terrorists Mr. Reagan had promised in 1981.

A similar gap between rhetoric and policy continued throughout the TWA crisis. In order to win the hostages' release, President Reagan negotiated with the terrorists indirectly through every conceivable intermediary, including Syria and Iran — usually high on the Administration's list of practitioners of state-sponsored terrorism — while insisting that the United States would never deal with terrorists. After the hostages were on their way home, the President repeated his stand: "The United States gives terrorists no rewards and no guarantees. We make no concessions. We make no deals."

But, as one diplomat put it, "The facts speak for themselves." Says former Secretary of State Alexander Haig: "It's not important how the world or public opinon perceives it — the bottom line is how the terrorists perceive our performance. If they perceive, first, that they got their prisoners back, second, they got attention, and, third, they are rewarded by the post-mortems, then clearly the outcome will be one that is not a deterrent to future terrorist acts."

The Administration's handling of the hostage crisis won praise from liberal Democrats, who felt he had demonstrated American steadiness and maturity by negotiating and getting the kidnapped Americans back alive instead of ordering senseless retaliation. But the President's conservative supporters were far from satisfied. One warned that the message the Russians will derive from the crisis is not a reassuring one for the United States: "When you cannot deter at this ambiguous level of violence, you begin to erode your credibility at more important levels, and it becomes harder to deter challenges in the future."

Both liberals and conservatives applauded the President's decision earlier this month to intercept the hijackers of the Achille Lauro. Ironically, this action, which seemed morally unambiguous to Americans of all political persuasions, led to diplomatic difficulties with Italy and Egypt, while the Soviet Union unexpectedly weighed in with an endorsement of the United States's move, calling it "understandable and just."

"I suspect the fact that the Russians had four of their diplomats in Beirut kidnapped and one of them killed may have put some sense into their heads," said Richard Pipes, a professor of history at Harvard University, who formerly served as a Reagan adviser on Soviet affairs. "They've been funding and arming many of these terrorist groups, directly and indirectly, and they suddenly find things get out of control and they're no longer immune." The fact that both superpowers are now vulnerable to terrorism may force that subject onto the agenda at the upcoming summit in Geneva.

IN THE FIFTH YEAR OF HIS Presidency, Reagan still has not been tested by a major United States-Soviet crisis. Some attribute it to luck, others say it is the result of the impression of renewed American strength he has conveyed to the world. Others, looking at the record, fear that the President, with his optimistic 1950's rhetoric, has created unrealistic expectations about America's position in the world that he cannot fulfill. Moreover, they argue, through inconsistent actions and a general reluctance to consult even members of his own party on foreign policy issues, the President has failed to create the kind of public or Congressional consensus necessary to deal with future crises when they arise.

As former Secretary of Defense Schlesinger told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: "A national consensus cannot simply be wished into being. . . . It will come about only through the development of mutual trust, reasonable success, and the sustained credibility of the executive branch." ■